

Disappearances:

Reflections on the collapse of honey bees and the Left

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A bustling city at dawn. Industrious workers set out from their homes, coming and going in a perfect and productive ballet. But by evening the workers vanish. No trace of foul play. No bodies left behind. Mass disappearances like this have recently occurred across the globe, not of humans, but of millions of honey bees.¹

THE OMINOUSLY TITLED 2007 PBS DOCUMENTARY *Silence of the Bees* begins with a montage of the streets of a major U.S. city that had grown silent because its inhabitants vanished. The empty city, we are told, is not unlike the beehives afflicted by Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), a commercial honey bee syndrome that has resulted in massive apian losses. A few minutes into the documentary, however, we are informed that the metaphor should be considered more literally, as “the bees’ disappearance could have colossal repercussions for humans.” As the documentary continues, a chorus of honey bee experts proclaims the apocalyptic scale of the unfolding CCD crisis, as bees “account for about one third of the food that is produced in America.” One suggests that “unless we only want to eat corn, wheat, and rice, we need bees.” Another supposes that “without bees, life as we know it, I do not think, will exist.”

Abruptly, mysteriously, and on a massive scale, honey bee colonies collapsed across North America at the end of 2006. Similar losses have also been observed in Europe, Japan and the Middle East. Reports from the southern U.S. this spring suggest that the problem continues unabated.

Colony Collapse Disorder was relentlessly incorporated into mass culture. Within a year it was the subject of a host of network documentaries, several popular books, and an episode of *The Simpsons* in which bees across Springfield suddenly vanished. Even Michelle Obama found it fashionable to include a honey bee colony in her new White House vegetable garden.

Public reaction to the plight of the honey bees was notably hysterical and irrational, as evidenced by the global persistence of a news story connecting CCD to cell phone usage. Less recognized and more pernicious is the prediction, reproduced in *Silence of the Bees*, that the loss of honey bees could reduce food production by up to 30%, which seems to have readily taken root in the public imagination. Subsequently, public anxiety about CCD and food security has been channeled into a host of popularly organized efforts. Nationwide campaigns to raise money for CCD research quickly materialized,

from community bake sales to national consumer product marketing campaigns. Public education initiatives have appeared but seem wholly lacking in direction, such as community drives to have their municipalities proclaim an annual “Day of the Honey Bee.” Community and municipal government projects to cultivate urban apiaries and bee habitats have become commonplace in large cities, in spite of the overwhelming predominance and importance of colonies in rural areas.

While there has been considerable research into the agro-ecological causes of CCD, this has not been matched by investigations into the *social* impulses behind the fascination and fear that has gripped such broad strata of society. An emphasis on studying “natural” causes highlights the widespread belief among researchers and agricultural professionals that keeping bees alive, as well as solving agricultural or environmental problems more broadly, is largely a technical issue. The result has been an excessive emphasis on the development of technical solutions. This reveals how study of “natural” causes today can be understood as a reified symptom of an impoverished popular consciousness, since it functions to completely obscure the social character of nature.

Popular understanding of the actual connections between society and “natural” causes are wholly inadequate. The reception of CCD in contemporary mass culture combines a borderline-apocalyptic pessimism toward the last generation of technical “solutions” (e.g., cell phones, pesticides, crop monoculture) with frenzied efforts to raise money for research to fund the next generation of technical innovation. In other words, the “leveraging” of public anxieties should negatively expose that no conscious social movement today could conceivably pull the levers themselves. The overwhelming and irrational public responses to CCD reveal the absence of the capacity to comprehend society that would come if reason could consciously determine its direction. The mania surrounding CCD exposes the fact that no broad-based political movement in the present could possibly shape even a modest agenda for agricultural policy reform today. The impossibility of reform, let alone any kind of substantive restructuring, is more worrisome than the disappearance of honey bee colonies itself. It signals the disappearance not only of the possibility of a mass conscious force that could direct society, but of the consciousness that such a thing might be desirable—or even necessary. In short, it signals the death of the Left.

Honey bees, like fertilizer or herbicide, are an impor-

tant modern agricultural input. Placing high densities of colonies in fields of pollination-dependent crops increases both yield and quality, which in turn helps maximize profitability. The dependence of crops on pollination, however, varies, and many important staples (notably the cereals) do not require insect pollination. While the most recent estimates suggest that 35% of the food we eat (2.3 billion metric tons (Mt) annually) benefit from pollination—essentially one out of every three bites—this estimate includes some very large bites that come from crops grown at present with a disproportionately small number of honey bees.

Perhaps the most extreme example is the case of potatoes, which constitute an enormous 300 million Mt of annual food production, just over one pollination-dependent bite in ten, but which require an insignificant number of pollinators to produce. On the other end of the scale, there is the pollination of the relatively miniscule 8 million Mt of almonds. The pollination of this crop in the U.S., the leading producer of almonds globally, requires the muscle of the entire U.S. beekeeping industry to accomplish, on account of this crop’s extraordinarily early blooming period. By contrast, other highly pollination-dependent crops that are far more deficient in the U.S. diet have not commanded the same attention. Fruit consumption in the U.S., for example, amounts to less than half the USDA recommended servings per capita, yet the number of colonies needed to pollinate almonds, which belong to a group with near-target consumption, is likely equal to the number of colonies needed to pollinate all fruit crops combined. Furthermore, recent surveys of pollination fees paid to beekeepers reveal that they receive three times the fee for almonds than for other crops. It would appear, then, that CCD is a big problem for the production of almonds, rather than a food security issue more generally.

The connection between food security and CCD becomes even less tenable when considering the overarching effect that economic and political factors have had on honey bee colony numbers and the agricultural landscape they pollinate. Massive global shifts occurred with the collapse of the Fordist state in the West and of the command economies in the East. An early indication of this shift took the form of agricultural upheaval. Cold War trade barriers began to be breached in the early 1970s with massive exports of wheat and soybeans into the Eastern Bloc. Spurred on by inflation, itself partly precipitated by labor militancy and wage demands in the

West, agriculture became one of the first areas of attempted restructuring.

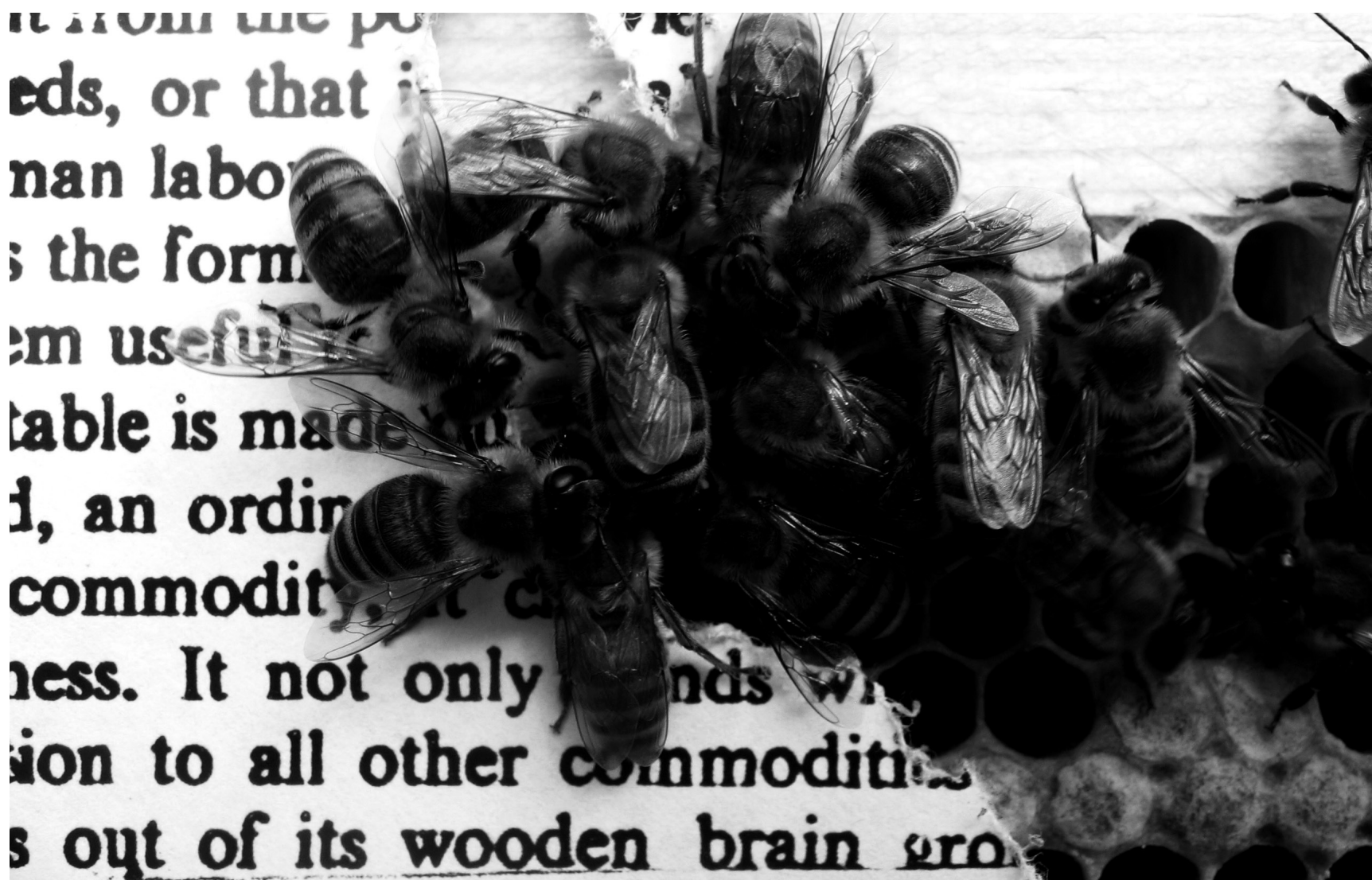
This restructuring largely escaped the notice of the New Left, which failed in the 1960s and early 1970s to connect the broad social movements of their time, such as the Civil Rights, student, anti-war, and labor movements, into a coherent renewed anti-capitalist politics. This failure meant agricultural instability could only be resolved through a very limited set of mechanisms, all of which seem necessary only if this larger, prior political failure is taken for granted.

The crisis of the 1970s, as it was manifested in agriculture, resulted in a rapid increase in prices. Beekeepers trebled their colony numbers to capitalize on these new opportunities. However, the elevated output, coupled with increasing market liberalization, resulted in intense global competition. Beekeepers in the U.S., previously buffered from world honey prices by New Deal-era farm price support programs, became mired in financial hardship when the government terminated these programs and increased interest rates. North American colony numbers declined dramatically. This was followed a few years later by an even more precipitous drop in colony numbers in the wake of the economic and political collapse of the Soviet Union. These colony losses far exceed anything exacted by CCD today.

The crisis failed to reinvigorate a Left that had been in decline for decades, and so instead was addressed from the Right through neoliberal economic reforms. From the beekeeping perspective, this was manifested in the stunning increase in production of higher value pollination-dependent crops, such as almonds. Since 1990 there has been an almost 300% increase in the production of these non-staple foods, an increase in output made possible by a 45% increase in honey bee stocks. Beekeeping has become more integrated into agriculture and its ties to crop production still more rationalized. The mainstay of beekeeper incomes, which traditionally depended on the sale of honey, has shifted. In Oregon, for example, beekeepers now derive over 70% of their incomes come from pollination, and most of this (67%) is derived from almonds. Furthermore, the dependency of beekeeping on external forces such as debt financing, equipment, labor, and other inputs has deepened. In a sense, the neoliberal food system is increasingly dependent on beekeepers and beekeepers have, in turn, become dependent on the new food system.

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Disappearances, continued from above



This new integration engenders new productivity, allowing diets around the world to be transformed in previously unimagined ways. It also creates a situation whereby beekeeping is more dependent on society as a whole, since a considerable amount of the work traditionally done by beekeepers and their families has been transferred to workers in the manufacturing and agrochemical sectors. The full realization of this emerging social productivity, however, would require a break from the forces that gave birth to them. That is, full realization of the potentials of modern agro-business are beyond the capacity of neoliberal or any other form of capitalism to realize. Of course, this view stands in sharp contrast to the conservative positions adopted by many activists and intellectuals of today’s Left who often take a negative attitude toward science, technology, and indeed, productivity. To them, there is no sense of possibility latent in the more dynamic elements of agriculture, notably in biotechnology. The difficult work previously taken up by the Left of trying to identify and advance the potential of the present has been replaced by nostalgia for a preindustrial and pastoral past. This is not to say that contemporary agricultural practices are unproblematic. The non-judicious and profligate use of pesticides

in hives, for example, is a formidable problem that is likely linked to CCD itself. Nonetheless, in the absence of a Left, there are severe limits to our understanding of how such a problem could be resolved. The currently fashionable approach has been to turn such problems into moral and lifestyle choices [for example, eating organically produced foods or buying brands that donate profits to CCD research], or else to relegate the problem to public and private agencies. But this strategy has already run up against its limits.

The moral dimensions of present-day agricultural populism re exemplified by a lecture delivered by Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Acting State Apiarist Dennis van Engelsdorp titled “A Plea for Bees,”² in which the solution to CCD was suggested to be in re-framing the problem as “Nature Deficit Disorder” (NDD). By romanticizing how humans have “forgotten our connection with nature,” the lecturer claims that “if we are able to reconnect to nature, we will be able to have the resources and interest to solve these problems.” The “easy cure” advanced is to convert urban lawns into meadows.

The phenomenon of CDD does not reveal our alienation from nature but our alienation from social productive forces. The “easy cure” simply reproduces the latter form

of alienation by channeling it into the former, satisfying immediate impulses and, in turn, deflecting attempts to reflect or clarify what CCD actually means. While watching bees on flowers in a newly cultivated suburban meadow may seem transformative, in reality the shift would do little more than to reaffirm current modes of food production. “Easy cures” such as those offered in “A Plea for Bees” would only reinforce mass public irrationality in service of undisturbed patterns of production. This is rendered quite clear by a campaign conducted by the premium ice cream brand Häagen-Dazs, which donates money to bee research when consumers purchase products from their Bee-Built Flavors line. In the 1980s, the company licensed to produce Häagen-Dazs in North America, Nestlé S.A., was the target of a successful global campaign against its marketing practices of infant formula in Africa. Having clearly learned its lesson, the company has joined forces with activists in advocating to revoke the New York City Health Department’s ban on urban beekeeping. In effect, it successfully channeled urban anxieties about the food system into a community issue of little real consequence to the large-scale survival of bee colonies.

The opening sequence of *Silence of the Bees* is

of various panned-out urban scenes of masses of people going to work. The footage has been sped up to eliminate any trace of human intention and to prepare for the bee hive footage to follow. The shot is reminiscent of Dziga Vertov’s experimental documentary film *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), which portrays a city waking as its population goes to work in a similar way. Vertov’s city dwellers, however, have a curious relation with the technologies of labor and leisure, one that fits the description of “labor tending into play.” Vertov’s 1920s masses stand in striking contrast to the bee-like masses of the present. An active and political Left made possible the understanding of how social labor could become conscious through the politics of freedom. It is perhaps *because* the politicization of the labor movement has no “connection with nature”—unlike the labor of the bee hive—that it was able to push against all preconceived limits of how society might be configured. Its social imagination was not limited to merely emulating patterns observed in the natural world. The framing of human labor as somehow “natural” is precisely what the Left challenged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is the disappearance of this challenge that draws us back to look for a “connection with nature” and prevents us from identifying the basis of agricultural problems in our alienated labor.

With the collapse of the Left, society looks to experts to provide technological solutions, even as popular mass culture insists that experts flatten their analyses. Experts, in habituating themselves and their study to a society that refuses to mature, participate in restricting the horizon of possibilities even for the “technical” solutions that society, increasingly lacking a consciousness directed toward mass social transformation, increasingly demands of them. Disappearances in such a society are met with adaptation. We will adapt to the disappearance of bees using new technologies to keep them alive. We will adapt to the disappearance of the Left by telling ourselves that the present could not be otherwise. Registering disappearances rather than passively adapting to them, however, opens the possibility of remembering the future. It restarts the unfinished project of uncoupling our labor from a blind, runaway development. It is the precondition for being able to pose the question, “How could bees be managed to nourish humanity in previously unimagined ways?” | P

1. Doug Schultz, *Silence of the Bees* (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2007), 50 min., 40 sec.; < <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/episodes/silence-of-the-bees/video-full-episode/251/>>.
2. Dennis van Engelsdorp, *A Plea for Bees* (TED Conferences, LLC, 2008), 16 min., 23 sec.; < http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/dennis_vanengelsdorp_a_plea_for_bees.html>.

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LP: For me, this was an astonishing development: In face of the crisis of Keynesianism and the defeat of trade unionism, those who had been most radical in their critique of reformism turned volte-face. For instance, Frances Fox Piven and her husband Richard Cloward wrote pointedly about how welfare politics demobilizes and incorporates poor people by robbing them of their radicalism and subordinating them to agents of the state whose job requires scouring households for evidence of men, since American welfare benefits are intended for support of single mothers. By the early 1980s in the face of Reaganism, Piven and Cloward were offering a full-some and undialectical support of the welfare state. *The New Class War*, it was called.¹ It is true there was a new class war from above, but leftists failed to remember the extent to which the people who needed the welfare state were also alienated from it, afraid of it, and felt it was not theirs to control. This was what fanned the popularity for Reaganite and Thatcherite anti-statist appeals in the first place. The same thing happened with Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. They undertook a radical critique of the educational system as social control, but in the 1980s turned to a defense of the Keynesian welfare state. Trying to retain the reforms that had been won, they bracketed their negative aspects and offered a one-sided defense.

That is the predominant politics today. The politics of the social movements in the 1960s were important, but the predominant politics remains a version of social democratic reformism. Whether or not they are “liberals in a hurry,” as Thomas Naylor termed the New Democratic Party (NDP), the politics of the Left has been very much on the defense throughout the last 20–30 years. The leftist political impulse is still to get a piece of the state, push a policy, or win a reform. Certainly, reforms are necessary, but there are many problems we should not ignore. The reforms gained have been constrained and are increasingly compromised with neoliberalism. They do not build in a way that gets beyond the contradictions of capitalism. Nor, when gained, do they gather momentum towards greater reform. Far from being “stepping stones”—even if just stepping stones to more policy changes—the reforms of the last 30 years or so have had a *demobilizing* effect.

How do we grapple with this? You cannot win people over to a transformative politics without being able to offer them some immediate returns. Workers need more unemployment insurance, students lower student fees, etc. Winning immediate demands is necessary. But connecting those demands to a long-term strategy that understands the limits of those reforms is exceedingly difficult. I was in El Salvador in 1995, after the conclusion of the peace process by which the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), the revolutionary organization that had engaged in a long civil war in El Salvador, reconstituted itself as a political party. Earlier it was a military organization. While there I was once shuttled around by a woman in charge of the education

department. She took me to meet a man who had been an important leader of the guerrillas. At dinner he said, “You know what is wrong with this party, and everybody in it? They think the long-term is the next presidential election,” which would have been held in four years, in 1999. He said, “That is the short term. We have to hope by 1999 we are a viable party with an activist base. The middle term is 2010, by which time we should aim to represent all progressive political forces in the country. The long term is 2020. By that point we should enter the state and carry through its radical transformation.” The woman who was taking me around looked at him, with tears in her eyes, and said, “In that case I am leaving the party. I cannot go back to people who have been through a civil war for more than ten years and tell them that they have to wait until 2020 before anything can happen.” That exchange captures the dilemma.

There is no easy answer for this problem. But I believe it is possible to build an organization that can win reforms while remaining strong enough to convince people that those reforms are limited, constrained, and precarious unless revolutionary reforms, or structural reforms, are won. This would be an organization dedicated to something very different than reformism, and would seek that type of structural change by which, for instance, nationalization of the banks occurs, allowing for democratic planning. That way we could choose not to let automobile plants go out of business and to retain all the skills and equipment involved in tool- and die-making, directing them to ecologically sustainable uses. When you close a parts plant, as is happening now all across Ontario, Ohio, and Michigan, you lose not only salaries, but an entire collective legacy of skills and capacities. You cannot save them unless you are able to redirect the capital that passes through the financial system. Doing this ultimately depends on making the financial system a public utility integral to a democratic planning process. I think people can be brought to understand this while demanding reforms that fall far short of it, knowing that while the reform may be limited and constrained it is necessary as a step towards structural or revolutionary change. But you need to have the type of committed organization and cadre that is willing to put the effort into doing that.

IM: On the issue of trade unions, there are many in the labor movement that in response to the financial crisis seek to return to class politics. But financial crises are not necessarily the best time for organizing unions, which have been shrinking for decades. How should the Left orient itself towards organized labor? I mean, is it just an issue of lacking people on the ground, a matter of historical defeats, or are there deeper structural problems the Left is failing to address?

LP: There are a number of reasons for the weakness of labor politics, including deep structural factors. Some of them are demographic; some involve the dynamic

development of capitalism and recent transformations in labor processes and markets; some have to do with changes in trade unionism itself; some are a matter of individual or generational shortcomings. In the great historical moment of socialism—from the Wobblies to the Marxist-Leninist parties and even to the social democratic parties—trade union leaders were prepared to risk their reputation with the workers, who had come to trust them, by coming out as socialists, as communists, as revolutionaries. This they did to win the workers over to a more radical politics. It was this commitment that led Marx and Engels to believe that trade unions could serve as schools for socialism. It was not because trade unions themselves were necessarily going to engage in revolutionary behavior, but because they could be the basis for cadres in the labor movement. It was in this context that Lenin’s *What is to be Done?* was written. His perspective was shaped by the experience of union struggles in Russia in the 1890s, where cadres in the labor movement advanced an explicitly revolutionary politics.

In terms of the deeper structural issues, there is the decline of the industrial organizations of the old type, the emergence of more flexible labor markets, the enormous growth of the service sector, all of which make it harder to organize unions. In consequence, there is a greater turnover of membership, units are smaller, and so on. There is also the tendency toward bureaucracy within working class organizations, most acutely in trade unions but also in parties. Robert Michels called this tendency “the iron law of oligarchy” in his book *Political Parties*, published around the time of World War I.² He grappled with the problem that arises when the type of people who organize other people, who have the gift of gab and a willingness to accept risks, end up leaving the office or the shop floor to become full time functionaries. This happens because you need people dedicated solely to taking on this incredibly powerful set of capitalists that you are working for and that have plenty of material support. So people are paid to work as full-time organizers out of the union dues. These few full-time union employees control the union funds, when the next convention is going to be held, and whatever means of communication the organization produces. Inevitably there is a structural barrier that, while not impossible to overcome, creates difficulties: Full-time organizers tend to use union resources to avoid returning to the shop floor. They do not want to go back to the mine. They interact on a daily basis with journalists and bosses. They find out that the bosses do not eat babies for breakfast, that they are not evil, and that they too are subject to structural constraints of competition. That can change them. At the same time, the people who elected the union functionaries are deferential towards them. Finally, there is someone standing and speaking up on behalf of the workers. The tendency of the rank and file is to give their leaders a large line of credit.

This is a tremendous structural problem in labor organizations, one that the labor organizations them-

selves and far too few Marxists have addressed. At the end of *History and Class Consciousness*, a book I find very problematic due to its teleological outlook, Georg Lukács says that the greatest problem of the working class movement is the problem of organization, and that it has hardly been theorized in the Marxist canon. He was right. Robert Michels was no Marxist, but a social democrat who ended up as a fascist supporting Mussolini in Italy. Still, he attempted to theorize working class organization. In the Bolshevik movement, Bukharin similarly regarded organization as a serious theoretical problem, while the rest swept it under the table. So, when speaking of structural problems, one cannot look only at capitalist labor markets, but must also contend with the structural problems of and within working class organizations. It is a topic to which the best Marxist minds along with the best organizers need to address themselves.

Audience Q & A

One of the unfortunate features of our international system is its existence as a system of empire. Canada, for example, has imperial ambitions directed against domestic indigenous peoples, as well as against Afghanistan, Haiti, and even against places within Europe, the U.S., and Canada that attempt to promote democracy. What does this international situation mean for organizing and what can Marxism tell us about it?

LP: The last 10 years I have been trying to develop a new Marxist theory of empire, since I am convinced that the old Marxist theory of imperialism has become a liability. When we hear the words “empire” and “imperialism,” we immediately think in terms of inter-imperialist rivalry, in terms of concentrated capitalist classes and monopoly capitalists who control the state. Even before 1914 that was, at least in some respects, a mistaken way of looking at the world. For the post-1945 period, this understanding is completely off-base. States are not simple representatives of concentrated monopoly capital, for one thing. But more to the point, the former empires have been integrated into the American empire. States with the strongest economic and political ties with the American state are precisely America’s former imperialist rivals, such as Japan and many of the nations of Europe.

The bourgeoisies of those states see the American state as the ultimate guarantor of property rights. Of course, this does not mean that their own states are unimportant to them or non-functional, nor does it mean that they become Americanized, or even transnational in some cultural sense. The French state is still French, the Italian still Italian, the Canadian still Canadian, but the bourgeoisies of these nations do not look to their own state to establish an exclusive sphere of accumula-

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tion for them. Other capitalist classes are encouraged to locate within the boundaries of those nation-states to accumulate and compete with domestic capital. The American state has led that struggle and has largely won it, removing capital controls, weakening protective tariffs, and so on.

The Luxemburgist argument that imperialism stems from an increasing difficulty to accumulate within one’s own borders was utterly ridiculous even in 1914. The notion that Theodore Roosevelt got involved in Central America because the American state had reached the end of the frontier is almost laughable. Yet this notion was constitutive of the political imagination of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and had a strong impact elsewhere. With respect to the American situation in 1914, California had barely been developed, and it had not yet discovered how to accumulate through the working class. It was assumed that capitalism would immiserate workers, when on the contrary it was already becoming apparent that, with the formation of unions and a nascent form of the welfare state, workers could increase their buying power as their productivity increased. It was possible to accumulate domestically by deepening capital accumulation at home. Capitalism has not primarily depended on foreign adventures. This is especially true of the capitalism of the later half of 20th century, at whose helm stands the U.S.

Now, this is not to say that an empire with extended political rule does not exist. It does, and it oppresses all kinds of people. Above all, it stifles any revolutions wherever they threaten to impede the purposes of capital. That is the main thing it does, and it goes well beyond American capital. The American state is the representative of global capital. It stands up for the rights of capital anywhere and everywhere. It protects capital within its own boundaries as well, of course. But it is much more than that, and it is in *this* sense that America represents a global empire.

I do not think the Canadian state is imperialist. Certainly, indigenous people have been oppressed within Canada, but to use the term “imperialism” for such oppression evacuates the term of meaning. An empire is defined by its sway beyond its own borders. The empire we have today is the American state, which has been burdened with the responsibility of making and managing global capitalism and reorganizing other states so that they cooperate in that process. This is how empire exists today. The use of the term “imperialism” by most of the Left has been shaped by anti-colonial struggles. It is used to mean dependency, connecting development and underdevelopment with political dependency. One consequence of this is that when people see Canadian investment in Ohio they define Canada as “imperialist.” If there is a shift of the surplus from one place to another, for any of a wide range of reasons, it is enough for some to describe this shift as “imperialism.” It is an utterly useless way of thinking about a stage of capitalism distinguished precisely by the opening of borders to

investment nearly everywhere. South Africa, for example, is certainly playing a sub-imperialist role in the southern cone of Africa, and maybe for all of Africa, but this is not primarily because of South African investment in Mozambique. The term “imperialism” is very emotive, and as such has become important for mobilizing people. I do not mind it being used in this looser sense, provided we recognize such usage as unscientific. So, in terms of the political struggles of indigenous people in Canada, the word “imperialism” might be quite useful rhetorically, but scientifically it is not worth much.

How would this apply to the U.S. going into Iraq, then? Can the invasion ultimately prove benign, or is this just the so-called new humanitarian imperialism that Michael Ignatieff, leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, talks about, or that the organization Doctors Without Borders talks about? Are these instances of “humanitarian imperialism” anything other than reorganizations of empire?

LP: No, they are reorganizations of empire. As effective and important as it was, the discourse of the new social movements was nevertheless tragic in that it centered on rights. Women have won rights in impressive ways even in liberal-democratic states. But it is too easy for the discourse of rights to mislead us into inviting the most powerful state in the world to establish rights for other people. You saw this above all in Rwanda until attention shifted to Bosnia, and then from one desperate area to another. It was the Left, the liberal left and sometimes the social democratic left, that called for the U.S. to intervene elsewhere in order to establish rights. After all, it is the only state capable of really doing it. But people forgot to ask, Why does the U.S. do this? Why does it suddenly concern itself with the rights of women in Afghanistan?

This does not mean that political leaders and various bureaucrats are not genuinely motivated by a desire for Afghan women to go to school if they want. But we should remember that they did not care much about that when they were fighting Communists, who were losing control and being defeated in Afghanistan primarily because in 1979–80 they moved too quickly to put village girls into school. If the American state goes into a country to establish rights, it does so for all kinds of reasons besides those of establishing rights. The main reason the United States bombed Yugoslavia was to show the rest of Europe that NATO would be the policeman of Europe in the post-Soviet world. It was not a primarily economic reason: It was not about pipelines, but about establishing NATO as the center of power in Europe. The main reason the U.S. went into Iraq was to ensure that Saddam Hussein would not be able to build up his oil revenues to the point that he would be subject to neither Saudi Arabian nor American control. Once the sanctions proved ineffective in blocking this project, the U.S. invaded. To the extent people justified these invasions on the basis of rights, they represent cases of “human rights imperialism” or, as Amy Bartholomew and Jennifer Breakspear put it in the *Socialist Register* in 2009,

“human rights as swords of empire.”³ This is why we need to better understand empire. It is not because rights are unimportant, but because a discourse in favor of human rights has often been used, both opportunistically and authentically, to justify imperialism. We ought to encourage supporting every way we can Afghan women struggling for their rights or, to take another example, Chinese workers struggling to develop an independent labor movement. But this is an entirely different position than the one adopted by the AFL-CIO, which demands that the American state not allow China into the WTO because there is no independent labor movement in China. There is a difference between people struggling to establish their rights and people asking the empire to impose them. The latter approach is incoherent, as the denial of those rights occurs with the tacit approval of the empire in the first place. The number of women who have been liberated in Afghanistan, even in the parts of Afghanistan that the U.S. or NATO controls, is minuscule not only because of the local forces at play, but because the actual liberation of Afghan women was never a strategic goal of the American intervention there.

I agree with what you said about the purposes and motives of U.S. military action, but must we not also remain critical of certain kinds of anti-imperialist politics? What complicates the issue for me is that we do not have an active, ideologically rigorous Left, a politically powerful, international Left could potentially provide true humanitarian support, among other things. I think it is this absence that leads to support for U.S. military intervention on supposedly “humanitarian” grounds, generating these politically hybrid characters such as Christopher Hitchens who are all over the place ideologically. It is an expression of the strangeness of the current moment. In the absence of a strong international Left, how does one avoid neoconservatism, on the one hand, and an anti-imperialism of resentment, on the other?

LP: First, I do not think that American state functionaries always have bad motives. Who knows what deludes people respecting their intentions and accomplishments. I doubt that even despite his cynicism Michael Ignatieff would prefer that basic civil rights were *not* established everywhere. I expect his motives are genuine, but he is blinkered. He fails to recognize that when the American empire installs those rights in other societies without effecting changes in the class balance or the basic structure of the state, then the “human rights” in question remain abstract and inaccessible except as vehicles for capitalist projects. This is not about motives. Dick Cheney may have had the worst motives conceivable, but these were not uniformly shared.

But you are right to pose this question. In a certain sense, we are all more internationalist than ever: Greeks in Canada, for instance, are able to function politically as though they are in Greece. They can watch Greek television and listen to Greek radio. They can read Greek newspapers that are not two months old. We are internationalist in the sense that the effects of global-

ization culturally, communicatively, and economically, make us much more aware of what is going on in the world. This is true for liberals and socialists alike. As a result, people want to see changes elsewhere. But in the absence of an international socialist movement, there emerges a tendency to throw money at problems via NGOs, for instance, which are extremely undemocratic in their internal organization. Greenpeace is a great example. Though I often admire the militancy of some of their actions, like their willingness to put a ship in harm’s way, what does Greenpeace as an organization accomplish, ultimately? It is very good at collecting five-dollar donations, door-to-door, but it fails to constitute of its benefactors a political force. There are activists, of course, but the people who give to Greenpeace remain isolated individuals. This is a real problem.

Young internationalists should commit to building political organizations in a non-naïve and unromantic way, and not just throw their support or voice their solidarity here or there. We need activists who strive to be political in the sense of understanding what they are running up against as well as what it is they want to do. This is what should have been asked of the Soviet leadership in previous generations. The tragedy is that at an organizational level this is a process of decades. People have to throw themselves into it, treat it as something more than a game, and commit for the long haul. This is hard. I think it is going to happen, though I do not know under what banner. I am not really sure if that is important. That may just be a matter of lexicon. It would not hurt if it were socialism, because that is a legacy worth maintaining. It would not hurt if it were Marxism non-dogmatically understood, because that is also a legacy worth maintaining. It would not even hurt if it were organized through a party, so long as our politics develop. **I P**

1. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *The New Class War: Reagan’s Attack on the Welfare State and its Consequences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

2. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Dover Publications, 1959 [1915])

3. Amy Bartholomew and Jennifer Breakspear, “Human Rights as Swords of Empire,” in “The New Imperial Challenge,” ed. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *Socialist Register* 40 [2004]: 125–145.

On nationalism: An anti-fascist intervention against Uli vom Hagen

Jerzy Sobotta



Anti-Semitic caricature from 1848 showing Jewish "revolutionaries" marching under a banner that reads, "Profit! Equal Rights with Christians!"

ULI VOM HAGEN'S RESPONSE¹ to my article on the current state of the German Left² engages in a remarkable apology for its nationalism, which results from its near complete failure to digest the dangerous policies of the German KPD of the 1920s and 30s. With his focus on the events of 1923 and his excitement for "National Bolshevism," vomHagen presents a highly symptomatic position informed by a gross conflation of nationalism and romantic-regressive anti-capitalism, which experienced its peak with the rise of European fascism and National Socialism in Germany.

To respond to vomHagen I will have to outline in brief nationalism's transformation from an emancipatory bourgeois ideology into a civilizational cataclysm. As we will see, this transformation is deeply intertwined with the development of bourgeois society and its regression in the

face of the failure of revolutionary politics at the beginning of the 20th century.

Nationalism was originally a liberal project advanced by revolutionaries. A democratic nation-state promised the third estate political empowerment and the legal protection of the individual. The creation of the nation was the project of an oppressed majority and constituted its attempt for political emancipation. The 18th and early 19th century liberal nation-states created the foundation for the advancement of capitalism, the mode of production that started to emerge in the previous centuries and which revolutionized the social forms of all of society. As a result, the abstraction and individuation of people changed the way that individuals encountered each other from then on: as legal subjects.

Created as an expression of freedom, bourgeois

subjectivity, however, soon encountered its limitations as capitalism itself progressed. The mechanisms of social domination embedded in the economic system bypassed the individual liberties the revolutionaries had fought for. In the first crises of the early 19th century it became obvious that the rules the economy followed were not controlled by a group of people, although they were put in place and constantly reproduced by human beings themselves. Industrialization and the emergence of the working class rendered bourgeois freedom formal at best. Their grim lives and brutal working conditions revealed the coercive character of this social system and the freedom of which it boasted. From the standpoint of the proletariat, as Georg Lukács pointed out in the twenties, it was possible to grasp the inherent antinomies of bourgeois thought and to formulate a practical answer to the problem of capitalism: revolutionary social transformation. With the proletariat established as a class, bourgeois freedom was to be clarified: In Marx's formula, "the free development of each (must become) the condition for the free development of all." This could only mean the proletariat seizing power in order to abolish its own existence as a class and with it the capitalist social order.

The contradictions between the bourgeoisie and the working class surfaced in the revolutionary attempts of 1848 which took place, as Leon Trotsky wrote, in one way "too early and in another too late. That gigantic exertion of strength which is necessary for bourgeois society to settle radically with the lords of the past can only be attained either by the power of a unanimous nation rising against feudal despotism, or by the mighty development of the class struggle within this nation striving to emancipate itself."³ The bourgeoisie, at that point, experienced an internal friction: while it needed the workers' support, it was afraid to lose the privileges it already gained. It gave up on the revolution and turned its back on the struggling workers. The proletariat, however, was not yet fully developed as a class. It lacked the organization and experience necessary to carry out the revolution on its own. The outcome of the failure of the Revolution of 1848 was the disintegration of bourgeois liberalism as an emancipatory ideology—and with it, the nation-state as an emancipatory project. As Marx recognized clearly in Louis Bonaparte's France, nationalism had become a project of the Right. The year 1871 reveals this disintegration of liberal nationalism in two world historical events. The first is Bismarck's reactionary unification

of Germany under Prussian aristocratic supremacy. The second is the Paris Commune, in which the newly emerged working class was able to organize itself as a political force and attempted to seize political power. Both mark, once and for all, the decay of bourgeois ideology as a vehicle for emancipation. It had degenerated into a counterrevolutionary force that stood in the way of any further advancement of human freedom.

The following decades of classical imperialism are the geopolitical and national counterparts of this ideological regression. The nation-state could no longer serve as the site for the advancement of liberal freedom, but could only be critically assessed as a catalyst for the capitalization of backward countries, a necessary evil for the development of the proletariat. Rapid industrial development and the expansion of the colonial powers to every corner of the globe went hand in hand with the growth of the proletariat in the cities of Europe and North America. The working class soon began to organize itself in labor unions and political parties. At the turn of the century the SPD in Germany became one of the world's biggest organization for laborers. Their bitter struggle steadily intensified, be it in the way of pushing through economic demands ("trade-unionism") or of organizing itself as a revolutionary force informed by Marxism. In any respect the proletariat became a serious threat to capitalist society as it existed, particularly to the rule of the bourgeoisie.

The welfare reforms that Bismarck passed in the 1880s were a strategic attempt to appease the workers and bind them to conservatism. Occasionally he even talked about "state socialism" in a thinly veiled attempt to break their ties to social democracy. This legislation was a deliberate tactic that accompanied the *Sozialistengesetz* of 1878, which ruled out any socialist or state-hostile agitation and banned several organizations.

Although Bismarck's politics did fail to break the workers from social democracy, it is still remarkable that the Revisionist Debate came into full swing only a decade later. Its main theoretician, Eduard Bernstein, argued for the replacement of revolutionary Marxism with actual economic demands and political reforms. This reformism can be seen in the light of Bismarck's reforms as they opened up an entire new dimension for demands on the nation-state. Despite the verbal defeat that Bernstein experienced, his reformist line would become dominant by the eve of World War One.

"Nationalism" continues below

Nationalism, continued from above



Barricade in Breite Strasse: Street Battles in Berlin in 1848

Although the orthodox Marxists had won the Revisionist Debate, in fact they were defeated by the growing, though inarticulate, currents of opportunism within the party. The devastating effect of this transformation was already sensed by left-wing revolutionaries of the Second International who fought vehemently against revisionism. It became disastrous, however, in the collapse of the Left with the beginning of the war: Throughout Europe social democratic organizations aligned with their imperialist governments and opted to support the national war.

This collapse is the expression of the grave regression the Left experienced in the time leading up to the war. Reformism gained strength by focusing on economic demands, welfare benefits, and national reforms. It became corrupted, substituting for freedom the improvement of working conditions. On a political level the reforms gained were dependent on the national economy by which they were funded. This meant a nationalization of the struggle, because the workers and the economy of each country compete with every other country on the world market. In a time of growing conflicts between the imperial powers and of increasingly chauvinistic rhetoric in national politics, the Left bound itself to the national struggle and willingly succumbed to it at the beginning of the war. This was only possible by abandoning Marxist dialectics as the political consciousness of the working class. The vulgarization and then purging of Marxism went hand in hand with the nationalization of the strug-

gle in which the potential for emancipation vanished. The SPD became regressive by trying to solve the problems of capitalism by mediating them through the state.

Political opportunism laid the ground for the events in the beginning of the 20th century. The military suppression of the 1918–19 socialist revolution in Germany was ordered by SPD politicians.⁴ That sealed the party's betrayal and realized reformism's counterrevolutionary potential. In a diluted way it anticipated the catastrophe of the 1930s and 40s. Certainly, it laid the groundwork for it.

VomHagen writes that the proletariat's nationalism was "more than a cultural phenomenon; rather, it had a political dimension that was not opposed to communist internationalism. Indeed, it alone provided the necessary basis for international solidarity between the workers of different nations."⁵ He disguises the reactionary transformation that nationalism as a bourgeois ideology had undergone since the mid-19th century. VomHagen falls prey to this nationalism and fails to see how the Communist Party's Schlageter Line in the 1920s was itself right-wing. It was introduced as a tactical response (and capitulation) to the anti-French riots that erupted especially in the industrial Ruhr area in 1923. It was meant to win over nationalist workers, military personnel, and the petty bourgeoisie. However, it came dangerously close to the emerging fascist movements by granting primacy to nationalism, as in the programmatic statement the KPD passed in August 1930 for "the national and social libera-

tion of the German people." A few years later "National Bolshevism" found sympathizers in the left wing of Hitler's National Socialist German Workers Party.

The prerequisites for the 1923 KPD's Schlageter line were the Ruhr crisis and the nationalist and fascist agitations against "entente capital" that managed capital accumulation under the treaty of Versailles. This opened up the dangerous possibility for cooperation between fascist, nationalist and socialist movements in Germany that the KPD tried to intersect with its tactics. VomHagen's nationalism however does not even take this "tactical" approach. It takes the way of back-to-nature movements and a "unity from a romantic, heroic, communitarian ethos."⁶ The romantic-nationalist idealism he presents is a fascist response to the crisis of the individual that alienation produces under capital. He also entirely leaves out what we can find today under the banner of "National Bolshevism": the Russian NBP whose banner is a Nazi flag with the swastika replaced by hammer and sickle.

The interwar period saw the German Left enter into a state of acute crisis after its own failed revolutionary attempts and the failure of the Russian Revolution to spark revolution elsewhere in the West. The economic crises of the 1920s and 30s and the post-war suffering bitterly demonstrate capitalism's instability and the necessity for change. As a direct result of the communist defeats, workers quickly became attracted to a new movement: fascism. The tactical failures of socialist revolution, the mass nationalization during World War One, and a working class movement purged of Marxism cleared the way for this development. Fascism is the political, organizational and ideological failure of the defeats of the Second International. Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler addressed the same problems of theory and practice that Lukács and Korsch did. Tragically the former succeeded where the latter failed.

Lukács raises the problem of reification in his dialectical conception. But here, reification *itself* opens up the possibility to overcome it:

Reification is, then, the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society. It can be overcome only by *constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development.*⁷

Proletarian consciousness is the "self-consciousness of the commodity." As such, it is the highest expression of the antinomies of capital. It emphasizes their opposing character and grasps their inner connection within a dialectical totality. Only by practically overcoming capital can the contradiction between abstraction and concreteness be abolished. Here sits the core of fascist ideology: it falsely plays out concreteness against abstraction as opposing concepts. The doctrine of glorifying concrete labor, leaderism, family, nature, and nation against circulating

capital, alienation, individualism, and internationalism is an immediate, fetishistic attempt to abolish reification without overcoming capitalism. Instead of grasping reality through a class, the proletariat, it takes the nation as the subject of history that falsely mediates the individual with the abstract. Mussolini writes:

The man of Fascism is an individual who is nation and fatherland, which is a moral law, binding together individuals and the generations into a tradition and a mission, suppressing the instinct for a life enclosed within the brief round of pleasure in order to restore within duty a higher life free from the limits of time and space: a life in which the individual, through the denial of himself, through the sacrifice of his own private interests, through death itself, realizes that completely spiritual existence in which his value as a man lies.⁸

The class struggle became a race war in which materialism was replaced by Social Darwinism as the theoretical method to work through the theory and practice problem. As with the Revisionists, fascists seek to address the capital problem by harnessing the nation-state.

"Socialism or barbarism!" was Rosa Luxemburg's conundrum in 1918 and it remains ours today. We can now read into her statement a tragic anticipation. The proletariat was ideologically integrated by fascist nationalism and it remains unconscious of its own historic role. The reification of consciousness was deeper entrenched and internalized in the course of the 20th century than Lenin, Luxemburg and Lukács could have ever imagined. This is the legacy of the twenties and thirties and it is the actuality of fascism today.

Learning from the history of this time requires a general suspicion of every attempt to mediate capital through culture and nation. This is what happened to the liberation movements in the Third World, including the Zapatistas in Mexico; this is why Chávez aligns with Ahmadinejad; and this is the agenda of Germany's new left party, Die Linke. **IP**

1. Uli vomHagen, "Rosa Luxemburg's Legacy: A Reply to Jerzy Sobotta," *Platypus Review* 20 (February 2010).
2. Jerzy Sobotta, "Rosa Luxemburg's Corpse," *Platypus Review* 16 (October 2009).
3. Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp-index.htm>>.
4. In 1918 the revolutionary left wing of the SPD around Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht split from the party. During the following year the SPD became an entirely reformist party while the revolutionary currents were represented by the newly formed Communist Party (KPD).
5. Uli vomHagen, "Rosa Luxemburg's Legacy: A Reply to Jerzy Sobotta," *Platypus Review* 20 (February 2010).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 197.
8. Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," in *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 164.